

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE A1-6

THE WASHINGTON STAR (GREEN LINE)
23 September 1980

Hostages' Fate in War Worries U.S.

By Walter Taylor
Washington Star Staff Writer

UNITED NATIONS — The escalation in fighting between Iran and Iraq has raised "serious concern" about the safety of the 52 American hostages in Tehran, Secretary of State Edmund S. Muskie said yesterday.

Speaking to reporters, Muskie drew a direct connection between continuing reports of hostilities between Baghdad and Tehran and the fate of the Americans who have been held since last Nov. 4 by militant followers of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini.

"We are concerned, seriously concerned, that any incident of this kind in that area of the world carries possible implications to which one ought not to be blind," Muskie said following a private lunch with West German Foreign Minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher.

The stepped-up fighting between Iran and Iraq was an unsettling development in the 10-month-old hostage crisis and one that could force the United States to consider new strategies for ending it. Previously, U.S. officials have expressed concern that the border dispute between the two Persian Gulf neighbors could divert Iranian attention from the hostage crisis.

Muskie's remarks yesterday indicated that the U.S. worry now goes to the safety of the hostages themselves.

Although the secretary of state did not address the question publicly yesterday, U.S. officials are also known to be concerned that the fighting might endanger supplies of Persian Gulf crude oil to the West.

At a briefing for reporters late yesterday, State Department spokesman John Trattner pointedly noted that the United States will continue to hold the Iranian government "fully responsible" for the safety of the Americans, irrespective of how events unfold in the fighting between Khomeini forces and those of the Iraqi Baathist regime of Saddam Hussein.

Trattner also sought to dispel Iranian suggestions that the United States is supporting Iraq in the fighting. "The United States is not involved," he asserted. "We're taking no side in that dispute."

CBS news yesterday reported that the State Department, through the Swiss, notified the Iranian government that the United States had nothing to do with the Iraqi decision to fight.

Muskie, who earlier in the day had renewed the U.S. call for a speedy, negotiated end to the hostage crisis, said he had asked the West German foreign minister for help in obtaining the best intelligence on the Iran-Iraq fighting, and would request the same information from other Western allies.

"Understandably, our intelligence sources in Iran are not all they might be," he said.

"The first step" for the United States, he said, "is to get all the facts, and undertake to determine what is involved — incidents or the prelude to something broader or more serious."

He sidestepped questions about possible new American strategies in response to the developments over the past few days.

"I don't think it would be particularly useful to chase hypothetical possibilities down separate roads," said Muskie. "I think the important thing is to get your facts well-established and then decide what you've got."

He did not rule out, however, the possibility that the United States might again bring the hostage situation before the Security Council in light of the latest developments in the region. "That is an option if the facts justify it," he said.

The Security Council twice has called on Iran to release the American hostages, but tougher action against Tehran was blocked by the Soviet Union's veto.

In his remarks earlier in the day in an address to the 35th session of the General Assembly, Muskie reaffirmed the Carter administration's willingness to consider Iranian grievances about past U.S. policy in exchange for safe release of the hostages. The speech left fuzzy the question of whether the United States would be satisfied by a commitment to release the hostages or would demand their freedom as a precondition for an airing of Iranian complaints.

Previously, however, U.S. officials have made clear that they would entertain a "package deal" involving an international inquiry into Iranian grievances and a commitment for the release of the hostages.

Quoting extensively from a letter he sent last month to the new Iranian prime minister, Mohammad Ali Rajai, Muskie appealed to the Iranians to "consider the human face of the hostage problem."

"These innocent people and their families have experienced acute suffering," he said. "I ask this community of nations to join us in urging that their appeal be brought to a safe, honorable and prompt end."

Regarding Iranian grievances, Muskie said: "We also know that in Iran, as in the United States, there are deep feelings as a result of grievances and suffering perceived in the past. We are prepared to do our part in resolving fairly questions between us."

In his General Assembly speech, Muskie also renewed sharp U.S. criticism of the continued Soviet presence in Afghanistan and called on the United Nations to investigate allegations that the Russians and their allies have used illegal chemical weapons in Southeast Asia.

"Today, more than one million refugees attest to the human toll of the violence in Afghanistan," he declared. "And more is at stake than the independence of one country."

"If this assault continues, the independence and integrity of every small, defenseless nation will be called into question."

Muskie said an "impartial investigation" of allegations that the Russians and their allies in Southeast Asia had used illegal chemical weapons "could most appropriately be launched under the auspices of the United Nations."

Muskie's address came just three days before his scheduled meeting here with Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko. The two are expected to hold preliminary discussions on the question of deployment of medium-range nuclear missiles in Europe and possibly to agree on the start of full-blown negotiations on that subject.